



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

**QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE:
TAKE NOTE OF ANSWERS**

Defence Budget

SPEECH

Wednesday, 15 August 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 15 August 2012 Page 50 Questioner Speaker Fawcett, Sen David</p>	<p>Source Senate Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Senator FAWCETT (South Australia) (15:22): Many in our community, particularly the defence community, the defence industry community and those who are concerned about our national security, cannot wait until this government's time has expired. We have just had Senator Brown tell us that there are no conditions of service that will be impacted. Tell that to the single servicemen, 21 years and older, who have just lost their entitlement to a free trip home to see their loved ones. This Labor government have probably about seven sitting days remaining before the disallowance motion tabled by the opposition will take effect. They have that long to stand up and nail their colours to the mast and say whether they will actually take away that entitlement of a serviceman as part of the budget cuts or, indeed, whether they will live up to the rhetoric that we have just heard again about how much Labor values our defence men and women.

In terms of defence cuts and their impact on training, under the Hawke government when I was still serving, when they started limiting track miles and flying hours and mothballing equipment, we did have to do exercises and rather than use blank ammunition say 'bang bang'. As I look at this current government under Prime Minister Gillard, who has limited track miles, has mothballed equipment and has reduced flying hours, it comes as no surprise to hear that, despite what may be reported through the echelons in Senate estimates, the reality on the ground for people is that those kinds of cuts may be in place.

We have heard much about the fact that current operations are not effective. But we also know that, despite those claims and despite the comments about not really touching the reserves, we are hearing day to day, week in and week out and as we would go and talk with reservists that their training days are being cut. When I go to welcome home parades and when I speak to people who are in the reserves, that is what is occurring. That affects current operations because our reserves are integrally engaged with the regular forces. Whether you are talking about the Air Force, the Navy or the Army, the reserves not only deploy with regular forces at times but particularly they backfill a lot of skills. I spoke just last night about the 300-odd reservists who have been called up to work in DMO because their skill sets are required in the technical area. People who are operations officers working with the Air Force are being used

in backfilling. There are communications specialists, medical officers, dentists and lawyers. All of these people support our operations, so it is a complete fallacy for this government to say that the cuts are not affecting defence.

We heard in estimates about things like the self-propelled artillery and we can see how this government just do not get it. They are saying that was the decision by Army to cancel the self-propelled artillery. The Army admitted that this is a less capable piece of equipment that they are now going to have to buy with more field guns. It is going to offer less protection to the troops and, perversely, because it takes more people to operate it, over its life it is actually going to cost the taxpayer more. The government says, 'Well, that is what Army advised us,' but, when pressed, what did Army say? They said that they would not have done it except for the government's budget cuts. So, yes, they advised the government on that course of action, but only because the government cut the budget. The budget expenditure as a percentage of GDP is now at pre-World War II levels—1938—and if you are any kind of a student of history you will know how poorly prepared Australia was for the Second World War.

The US Defense Secretary, Leon Panetta, has said of the US as they scale back with budget cuts that the most important thing they must do is not hollow out the force. It is not just the opposition saying that about the Australian situation; there are a number of people who have had long careers in defence, people who have been commentators working in the national security space. ASPI just today has come out with an article saying that a number of commentators have expressed 'dismay with the government's recent handling of defence'. It is not just that defence funding has been reduced substantially over the next few years; most observers conclude, probably rightly, that 'the government's long-term commitment to strengthen Australia's defence has evaporated'. The commitment has evaporated and the commitment to strengthen our defence means that their commitment to our national security has evaporated.

ASPI goes on to say that it is more to do with the 'way that defence is run', and I have certainly got much more to say in this place in the light of the defence procurement inquiry and looking at the impact of government initiatives—things like the Strategic

Reform Program, where again cost-saving measures are being driven that are bringing about decisions like the self-propelled artillery decision, which is not in our national interest. (*Time expired*)

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! The time for debate has expired.

Question agreed to.